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VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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May 20, 2008

The Honorable James B. Peake, M.D.
The Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20540

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Thank you for your recent testimony to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs regarding the high rate of veterans' suicides. I appreciate your candor and obvious dedication to supporting those who served our country in the military.

The staggering number of veterans' suicides, especially among members of the armed services returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, indicates an urgent need for corrective action at the highest levels to address this epidemic. Since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) there were more than 4,000 combat deaths; yet, in 2005 alone there were more than 6,200 suicides among those who served in the Armed Forces. In 2007 that number was estimated to be 12,000 suicides.

There is a clear link between veterans who return from combat with mental health concerns such as severe depression and PTSD and those veterans who commit suicide. Recent studies indicate that more than 25 percent of returning servicemembers have mental health conditions, and approximately 300,000 individuals suffer from PTSD or major depression as a result of serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even more distressing, knowing the causal link between debilitating mental conditions and suicide, only about half those with PTSD or depression have sought treatment, and only half again received minimally adequate treatment. This means that while one in five of our men and women in uniform are suffering, only a quarter of those who come home with these conditions receive the treatment they need.

Data also shows that Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have the highest suicide rate among veterans of all wars, between two and four times higher than civilians the same age.

While I appreciate the steps the VA has taken toward increasing recognition and treatment of suicidal veterans, these efforts are not enough. As we both heard in the committee hearing, it is estimated that only one percent of male veterans actually call a suicide hotline. Since October 2001, about 1.6 million U.S. troops have been deployed to OIF and OEF, and there will undoubtedly be thousands more returning veterans with deep depression or PTSD, or both. In a time of war, we know with certainty that demand for mental health care will continue to rise and it is unthinkable to provide anything less than world class care and treatment.

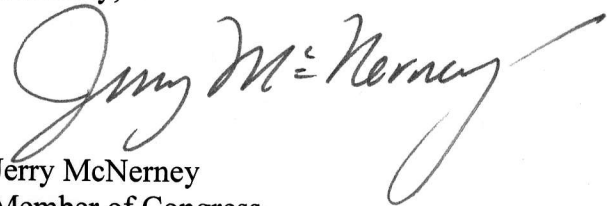
Additionally, I am concerned that recent actions by high-ranking personnel at the VA seem to indicate a disturbing emerging trend of withholding information, advocating misdiagnosis, and an unwillingness to fully address the veterans' suicide epidemic. From altering statistics regarding the overall number of veterans' suicides to recent direction from a Texas mental health administrator to misclassify cases of PTSD as lesser cases of Adjustment Disorder, indications point to a serious breach of public trust at the VA.

If we are to truly address this crisis in a comprehensive way, the VA must honestly and forthrightly acknowledge the scale of the problem, as well as dedicate the appropriate resources to solve it.

Our country's heroes deserve the best care in the world, and we owe them no less than an absolute commitment to provide the support and services they need to return to healthy and productive civilian lives. Congress took a much needed step with passage of the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, and I strongly recommend you formulate a comprehensive strategic plan to deal with the problem of veteran suicide.

The Veterans' Affairs Committee will work with you to provide needed resources, and I in particular look forward to working with you to ensure we keep the promise we have made to our veterans. I eagerly await your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Jerry McNerney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Jerry McNerney
Member of Congress